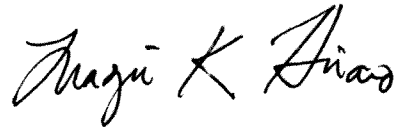


Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-1102

STATEMENT OF
CONGRESSWOMAN MAZIE K. HIRONO
ON THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF
H.R. 1287: FILIPINO VETERANS FAMILY REUNIFICATION ACT
MARCH 7, 2007



Madame Speaker:

On the first of this month, I reintroduced the Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act (H.R. 1287), which will provide for the expedited reunification of the families of our Filipino World War II veterans.

This body has many times heard accounts of the bravery of the Filipino veterans: how they fought shoulder to shoulder with American servicemen; how they sacrificed for the same just cause. For too long, we have ignored the promise we made to those men to provide benefits and care equal to that provided to our own soldiers.

As the House prepares for debate on comprehensive immigration reform, let us remember the broken promises made to our Filipino World War II veterans and provide for a meaningful way to make amends by expediting the immigration petitions of their sons and daughters.

I would like to submit into the *Congressional Record* an article that recently appeared in the *Washington Post* that humanizes the intent of my bill.

Hope for Amends to Filipino Immigrants

Bills to Speed Children's Moves to U.S., Give Military Pensions Show Political Assertion

By N.C. Aizenman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, March 4, 2007; A06

Amid the wrangling over immigration reform, virtually everyone in Congress appears to agree on one point: Filipino-born veterans who fought alongside U.S. troops during World War II deserve a break.

Denied the right to immigrate to the United States until 1990, they came hoping that their children could follow them here later, just as other groups have done. But the adult children have been required to wait twice as long -- up to 16 years -- as anyone else. With the veterans often too old and sick to travel home, many have died while waiting to be reunited with their families.

Now, after several longtime backers have risen to key positions in Congress, Filipino American advocates are hopeful that legislation will be pushed through to exempt the veterans' children from the immigration delay. They also are optimistic about a potentially more controversial bill that would grant Filipino veterans military pensions.

About 5,000 veterans in the United States would stand to benefit from a change in immigration provisions, and an additional 10,000 in the Philippines could be eligible for pensions.

To many in the 2-million-strong Filipino American community, the issue represents a chance to cement their political identity in a nation where they have long felt invisible, even though Filipinos rank second, behind Mexicans, in the number of immigrants living in the United States.

"Historically, we Filipinos have always been looked down on as your little brown brothers -- as these acquiescent people who would just accept anything Uncle Sam would do to them," said Jon Melegrito, communications director of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations. "This is about asserting who we are as a people and how we served this country. . . . It's a call to action to stop acting like colonial slaves and to start acting like first-class citizens."

The effort builds on an association with the United States that dates to 1898, when the United States acquired the Philippines from Spain after winning the Spanish-American War.

Laws and discriminatory practices against all Asian immigrants kept Filipino numbers in the United States low through the first half of the 1900s. But in the Philippines, many residents were taught English and raised to think of themselves as something akin to Americans.

Celestino Almeda, 90, a veteran who lives in Alexandria, remembered that the director of his elementary school in Manila led students in a pledge of allegiance to the American flag every morning.

"We also celebrated all the holidays: Washington's birthday, Armistice Day," Almeda said. "In our mind, it was like America was our mother country."

When Japan invaded the Philippines in 1941, more than 200,000 Filipinos joined Americans in waging a fierce resistance, enduring such horrors as the Bataan death march and the grueling guerrilla campaign that followed. Technically, the Filipino fighters were under overall U.S. command. But within months of the Allied victory, Congress stripped most of them of their rights as foreign veterans of U.S. forces -- including the opportunity to become U.S. citizens -- on the grounds that the Philippines was about to be granted independence.

Even so, the Philippines continued its close affiliation with the United States. Thousands of Filipinos joined the U.S. Navy, which until recently had major bases there. By 1970, there were more Filipinos in the U.S. Navy than in the Philippine Navy.

And, after 1965, when Congress repealed the nationality quota system that had practically prohibited Asians from immigrating, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos streamed in.

Ranging from unskilled workers and nannies to nurses and professionals who came in on occupational preference visas, the new arrivals immediately formed social, cultural and professional organizations. Before long, they were rising to prominent positions in government, unions and the military. Several won elected office, including in Prince George's County, where a sizable community settled.

Yet when it came to turning their clout into political activism on behalf of Filipino American causes, many of the immigrants hesitated, said Bing Cardenas Branigin, 50, a former regional chairman of the Filipino American federation.

"There was this sense that you shouldn't make trouble, that you shouldn't contradict the government," she said. "You should just pay your taxes and send your kids to school and keep quiet."

That began to change in the mid-1970s when anger spread over the repressive policies of the Filipino president, Ferdinand Marcos. As much as their opposition to Marcos galvanized the Filipino American community, it also caused rifts with those who supported Marcos.

After Marcos was ousted, community leaders looked to refocus their newfound energy on a more unifying issue. The fight for veterans' equity was a natural choice.

Since then, the veterans have won some of the benefits they lost after the war. Most notably, in 1990, Congress granted Filipino World War II veterans the same opportunity to naturalize offered to all other foreign nationals who served in the U.S. armed forces.

But the Filipino veterans remain ineligible for a military pension, forcing many of the more than 24,000 elderly veterans who became U.S. citizens after 1990 to live off food stamps and Supplemental Security Income payments.

Joaquin Tejada, 84, a former guerrilla fighter who survived two years resisting the Japanese from jungle hideouts, said he now struggles to get by with his \$545 monthly SSI check. The rent for the two-bedroom apartment he shares with another Filipino World War II veteran in Columbia Heights takes \$275.

"By the end of the month, it's hard to buy even basic food," said Tejada, who proudly sported an American flag tie during an interview.

Then there is the 16-year wait veterans face if they wish to bring over their adult children, an unintended consequence of the 1965 law lifting the quotas that had prevented most Asians from immigrating.

In their place, Congress introduced a complicated system meant to offer every country the same number of family reunification visas. But because Filipino applicants far outnumber the yearly slots allotted to them, they face the longest delays -- 22 years to sponsor an adult brother or sister, for instance, compared with 11 years for applicants of most other nationalities.

Candida Romulo, 72, said she and her husband, Bayani, a veteran who became a lawyer in Manila, would not have naturalized and moved to Oxon Hill had they known that the wait to sponsor their grown children would be so long.

"We did it because we wanted to give them the opportunities of living in this country. It was going to be our gift to them," Romulo said during an interview in a living room crammed with photographs of her four children.

Soon after the couple's arrival, Bayani developed a medical condition requiring frequent dialysis, making visits to the Philippines impossible. Because of their pending residency applications, his children were unable to get visas to visit him.

When Bayani suffered a severe stroke in September, his eldest son wasn't able to relay his final words to his father over the phone before he died.

"The receiver couldn't reach his bed in the ICU," Candida Romulo said. "So I told my husband, 'Your son says that he loves you very much and that he's so proud that you are his father.' My husband couldn't speak, but I could tell that he understood, because there were tears in his eyes."

Now Romulo worries that her son may never gain entry to the United States, because if a sponsor dies while the visa application is pending, there is a chance that the application will be annulled.

But she said she is still praying that Congress will pass the legislation for the sake of those veterans who remain alive.

"If that happens, I know my husband will be very happy about it, even if he is already in heaven," she said.